10 days in Dallas: A notebook

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It is said that nearly everyone in the civilized world heard about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy within half an hour of his death.

Friday, Nov. 22, 1963, for people of my generation is one of those days, etched in memory as if by acid, when everybody remembers where he was and what he was doing.

It is difficult to convey to those unborn or very young at the time the grief and anger that gripped this nation when the 1,000 days of Camelot ended with Mr. Kennedy's death.

It was my job to rush to Dallas after Mr. Kennedy died. For the next 10 days I became as intimately acquainted as a reporter could with Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby, Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry, Homicide Squad Captain Will Fritz, a small army of FBI and CIA agents, the families of Oswald and Ruby, and a whole cast of characters who knew them both.

For half an hour I found myself having custody of the Mannlicher Carcano rifle used by ex-Marine Oswald to slay the president. I also acted as a pall-bearer for Oswald because only his mother, his brother and a handful of reporters turned out for the funeral of the sullen loser who murdered Mr. Kennedy for reasons he took with him to the grave.

It also was my fate to be standing less than 12 feet from Oswald when Ruby shoved a pistol into his gut and killed him in the underground garage of Dallas Police Headquarters.

I was a 43-year-old reporter for The Washington Star and was the office trouble-shooter at that stage of my career, accustomed to nasty assignments. Cops and robbers was my game.

In Dallas, the police station was a madhouse. The building was overrun with reporters and cameramen, with FBI agents, curious spectators and hangers-on.

The Dallas police had a folksy attitude toward the press. Sometimes I was asked for identification, more often not. There was a mass of humanity everywhere, especially on the third floor where Capt. Fritz and Chief Curry had their offices.

I met Jack Ruby almost immediately. It would have been difficult not to meet him. Ruby had the run of the place. He knew all the cops and he made himself a pest telling the out-of-town reporters who everyone was, offering to go out for sandwiches and interrupting conversations. He gave me his card. Thinking he was a bail bondsman, I stuck it in my pocket. In fact, he was owner of a sleazy striptease bar called the Carousel.

I have lost count of the number of impromptu press conferences held by Chief Curry, Capt. Fritz and District Attorney Henry Wade all through the night Friday. They kept bringing Oswald out into the third-floor corridor where the newsmen shouted questions so loudly it was almost impossible to hear what Oswald was saying.

I was up all night in the police station and stayed on through Saturday until 3 a.m. Sunday. By then I had made a friend of Police Capt. Glen D. King, who gave me a tiny, windowless interrogation room next to Chief Curry's office. It had a telephone, my lifeline to The Star.

From time to time, I sallied forth. I went to the home in Irving, Texas, where Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina, lived and was allowed to interview his landlady, Ruth Paine, when we discovered a similar interest in doing double-crostic puzzles.

I also made phone calls to the CIA in Washington that almost sank me, because one official told me that Oswald had been seen in Mexico City a month before in an open-air nightclub with a redhaired man and a black Cuban. The story, later proved to be false, was that Oswald had been given $5,000 at the club.

We came within minutes of printing that story on Page 1 until I ruined the managing editor's day with a mandatory kill call after checking with Assistant FBI Director Cartha DeLoach in Washington. The FBI had checked it out and it was not true.

Oswald had indeed gone to Mexico and tried to get a visa to go to Cuba, but was stonewalled by the Cuban consulate. Given the mood of the American people, Fidel Castro might have faced an invasion if there had been a transfer of funds to Oswald by a Cuban.

Late on Saturday, Nov. 23, Chief Curry told us that Oswald was going to be transferred to the sheriff's jail sometime Sunday morning, but he promised us the move would not take place until after 10 a.m. I got two hours of sleep and returned to the police station at 8 a.m. to watch Oswald leave.

I encountered a young radio reporter named Ike Pappas. We used a stopwatch to see if we could watch Oswald being escorted to the third-floor elevator and then beat the elevator down to the garage floor. Finding we could, we waited outside the homicide squad office.

Originally, Chief Curry's plan was to transfer Oswald in an armored car. At the last minute he decided secretly to use the armored car as a decoy and put Oswald on the floor of an unmarked police car. At about 11 a.m., Oswald was handcuffed to De-

tective J.R. Leavelle and started for the elevator. Ike and I watched until Oswald was in the elevator, then we ran down the steps three at a time to the garage. We got there ahead of the elevator with seconds to spare.

Ike stood a few feet to the left of the double doors, and I walked 10 paces ahead and turned to watch. The doors opened amid shouts of "Here he comes!" Just then the police driver of the unmarked car nervously started to back up toward the doors, did it too fast and slammed on the brakes with a loud squeal.

Everyone, even Oswald, looked at the car in alarm. The rear wheel was less than an inch from my feet. When I looked back toward Oswald, I saw the figure of a man gliding toward Oswald and the detective. The man was wearing a hat and, I thought, an overcoat.

I saw the hammerless pistol in his hand as he shoved the muzzle toward Oswald's stomach. I heard the sound of the shot and saw the grimace of pain on Oswald's face, and then Oswald and the gunman vanished in a human tangle of bodies and shouting policemen.

Time stood still, but only for a few seconds. Every policeman in the garage pulled out his pistol looking for someone to shoot. All I could think was "I gotta get to my phone." I thought I was rushing to tell my newspaper the news first. I did not know until later that it was Ruby who had shot the president's assassin.

I took the elevator to the third floor. Passing the chief's open door, I saw Chief Curry sitting there alone, oblivious to what had just happened in the garage. He was writing thank-you notes to citizens who had congratulated him on the good job he was doing.

I stuck my head in his door and said, "I got some bad news for you, Chief."

The chief, a jolly-looking double for Archie Bunker, smiled and said, "What's that?"

I said, "Somebody just shot Oswald."

His face turned to the color of hawk meat. He threw down the pen and said, "Oh, [expletive deleted]!" I could hear the pounding of feet as policemen raced toward the chief's office, so I slipped into my interrogation room, locked the door and called The Star.

While I was doing an account of what I had seen for radio station WMAL, there was a knock at the door. I opened it a crack and saw an FBI agent I knew named Vince Drain. He had a long package wrapped in brown paper. "Does the Old Man know?" he asked me tensely. He meant FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. I said I didn't know about that. "I gotta call the bureau!" Mr. Drain said. "Not on this phone you don't," I said.

He handed me the brown package, told me not to let anybody in or out, and disappeared. I put the package on a desk and kept on broadcasting. Half an hour later, Mr. Drain came back, much relieved that there had been FBI agents on the scene, and said, "I'll take the rifle back now."

"What rifle?" I asked.

"That's the Mannlicher Carcano Oswald used," he said. "I just got back from the crime lab in Washington."

The next seven days were a blur. I found Jack Ruby's card in my pocket. On it were printed the words "Good for One Free Drink at the Carousel." I went there and found out firsthand from the bartenders, the strippers and the waitresses that Ruby was a brutal, emotional brawler, a fringe-of-the-mob type from Chicago.

I talked to his roommate and his sister and established that he always carried his gun and had left his place that Sunday morning to send $25 to a stripper in Fort Worth. The Western Union Office was across the street from the entrance to the police garage. The money was sent at 11:17 a.m. Ruby shot Oswald at 11:21 a.m.

Over the past quarter century, I have read a score of conspiracy-theory books and I spent a year covering the House investigation of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I still believe what I believed at the end of that first horrible week: Oswald acted alone for his own twisted reasons, and Jack Ruby impulsively committed an equally twisted act of revenge.

How can I be so sure? The most important reason is that Ruby could have killed Oswald several times either Friday night or Saturday after the Kennedy assassination, because he was with the uncontrolled press mob.

In fact, it would have been easier for him then than it was Sunday morning, when the Dallas police were starting to worry about Oswald's safety. Beyond that, there is no evidence of any connection between Oswald and Ruby. Oswald bought the guns he used to kill Mr. Kennedy and Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippit. His fingerprints were on the rifle and at the sniper's nest in the building where he worked.

Nobody knew what time Oswald would be in the police garage, and Ruby's casual trip to send a telegram showed him a door through which he could walk onto the stage of history. Oswald had 72 hours to plan his deed, because the motorcade route past his office was printed in the Dallas papers.

There are plenty of hate-filled wackos out there, like Oswald, and there are even more like Jack Ruby who equated his gun with his manhood.

They don't all live in Dallas. It only seemed that way 25 years ago.